

## **Fact, Fiction and the Blurring of Boundaries in Annie Ernaux's 'The Years'**

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### **Abstract**

The Years' by the noble laurate Annie Ernaux is a novel that has gained wide critical acclaim. It is considered a seminal work of auto fiction due to the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction in the representation of the narrator's life. The narrator's subjective experiences and perceptions of reality are interwoven with broader cultural and social observations, creating a multi-faceted and complex portrayal of the self and the world. Annie Ernaux employs the unique features of auto fiction in 'The Years', allowing her to explore her personal experiences more freely than traditional autobiography permits. It is considered to be a remarkable piece of 'auto fiction' which is a powerful tool for exploring the complexities of the self and the human experience 'The Years' is a revolution, not only in the art of autobiography but in art itself. In this novel, Ernaux blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction in a unique and powerful way. The author's use of first-person narration, combined with her distinctive writing style, creates an intimate and introspective narrative that explores the complexities of memory, identity, and the passage of time. The book provides a glimpse into the life of Ernaux and her generation. It also portrays the changes and challenges she faced while

navigating her way through the years. At the same time, it is a meditation on the larger social and cultural changes that took place in France during the author's lifetime. It is a commentary on the ways in which these changes shaped the lives of those who lived through them. Through its exploration of the boundary between fact and fiction, 'The Years' highlights the importance of personal narratives in shaping our understanding of the world.

**Keywords:** Autofiction, memoir, consumerism, feminism, modernity

'The Years' by the noble laurate Annie Ernaux is a novel that has gained critical acclaim. It is considered a seminal work of autofiction due to its blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction in its representation of the narrator's life. The narrator's subjective experiences and perceptions of reality are interwoven with broader cultural and social observations, creating a multi-faceted and complex portrayal of the self and the world. Anju Matthew exclaims, "Filled with big insights in small sentences, Annie Ernaux's The Years is a not-so-linear

journey from her birth in 1940 to 2006, intertwining her private life with the political milestones of France and the consequent impact of these events on her generation.”

Autofiction is a relatively recent genre in the field of literature that combines elements of autobiography and fiction. The term was first coined by the French writer and critic Serge Doubrovsky in 1977. Since then, it has gained popularity as a genre that blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction in its representation of the self. Autofiction differs from traditional autobiography in that it allows the authors to manipulate and alter elements of their life stories in order to create a more compelling narrative. This manipulation can range from small modifications to the addition of completely imagined events and characters. In doing so, autofiction creates a space for writers to explore their subjective experiences and perceptions of reality, while also blurring the line between fact and fiction

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into a unique evocation of the times in which we lived, and live” (Banville).

'The Years' was published in 2008. This book is a multi-layered narrative that charts the transformation of French society and culture from 1940 (Ernaux's birth) to 2006. The novel is a personal memoir that tells the story of the author's life and her experiences growing up in France during the 20th century. The famous critic Azarin rightly feels that “The process of reading 'The Years' is similar to a treasure box discovery, filled with old family photo albums, some having a few words in the back, yellowish and falling apart. For the reader, the images of the past reveal themselves in broken shapes and forms with holes all over. You leaf through this pile of images and texts and feel immersed in the past. The years have come and gone, and most of the moments lived — captured only in photos and partially in memory— have vanished.”

'The Years' by Annie Ernaux is an example of autofiction, which is a genre that combines elements of fiction and non-fiction. In the novel, Ernaux blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction by incorporating elements of personal memories, cultural and social observations, inner thoughts, and imagined events into the narrative. The narrator is not always reliable, as the lines between truth and interpretation are often blurred. The novel also features, fictionalized dialogues, imagined characters and events, further contributing to the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction. The result is a highly subjective and personal account of

the narrator's life and the cultural and social changes she witnesses over time. In this sense, the fictional element in 'The Years' is not limited to a single aspect of the novel, but rather permeates the entire work and contributes to its unique character and style. In this novel, the author uses her own life experiences as the basis for the story, but also employs fictional elements to create a narrative that is both true to her own experiences and also shaped by literary conventions.

Annie Ernaux's novel 'The Years' does not explicitly specify the imagined events and characters within the text. The narrator's subjective perspective and imagination play a significant role in shaping the events and characters depicted in the book, making it difficult to distinguish between what is real and what is imagined. It is not specified which characters in the book are imagined and which are based on real people. However, the novel's focus on personal memory, inner thoughts, cultural and social observations, and the subjective experience of the narrator suggest that the imagined elements are likely shaped by these elements and the narrator's unique perspective.

The narrative is told from the perspective of an unnamed narrator who reflects on the experiences, memories, and cultural shifts of her life, while also exploring the broader social, political, and cultural changes of her time. It is written in the first person and is divided into a series of vignettes that cover different periods of the author's life, from her childhood in the 1940s to the present day. Lauren is all praise of the skill

of Ernaux and states, "She shows it is possible to write personally and collectively, situating her own story in the story of her generation."

Annie Ernaux states that the motivation behind writing 'The Years' was her concern about losing her memories as they fade away, "All the images will disappear" (1). Throughout the novel, she recounts her memories through the use of photographs, snapshots, and personal items. The narrative is interspersed with regional dialects, colloquialisms, and slang. The novel commences with a montage of recollections and images from the era, depicting the author's identity in a swiftly transforming world where a new, carefree, and fast-moving generation fails to value the past. The opening sentence in the novel presents a photograph, "It is a sepia photo, oval-shaped, glued inside a little cardboard folder with a gold border and protected by a sheet of embossed, semi-transparent paper" (1). The author creates a visual image of her childhood to show readers that despite her poor background, her family was happy.

'The Years' is heavily influenced by Annie Ernaux's personal life. The noted columnist David compliments Ernaux as "ruthless" for, in this novel "all the things she has buried as shameful and which are now worthy of retrieval, unfolding, in the light of intelligence". Her parents owned a grocery store and café in the small town of Yvetot, France, where they all lived together in the rooms above. Despite their humble background, her parents valued

education and encouraged her to pursue it. Dwight Garner notes, "Ernaux's book delves into the details of her life while uncovering universal themes. In 'The Years', the author contemplates her working-class background in post-World War II France and the sacrifices her mother made to ensure her education. Ernaux goes beyond mere homage to her parents and the past by making it a central theme in her work. The book begins with recollections of her childhood and family, and is presented through a series of photographs that depict Ernaux's own life.

A recurring theme in 'The Years' is the narrator's contemplation of her mother's influence on her life. As she matures and becomes a mother herself, she gains an understanding of the comfort and support her mother provided despite the challenging circumstances of her upbringing. Despite her tough upbringing, the mother is portrayed as warm and competent, though somewhat unpolished. Although Ernaux mentions her mother's later battle with Alzheimer's disease, she doesn't provide many details on the subject. Ultimately, the mother is a constant, unchanging figure from the past, symbolizing a time that can never be regained. Likewise, the woman featured in the photographs frequently reflects on her father, whose death is portrayed as devastating. The book explores his mannerisms in detail, particularly in the early sections. Ernaux also depicts her family's humble beginnings and her mother's tireless efforts to support them.

The author also examines her own experiences of feeling insecure and inadequate as a child, and the impact of these emotions on her relationships with others.

Throughout 'The Years', the author depicts the various changes and obstacles she encountered as she transitioned into adulthood. This includes her involvement in the student and feminist movements of the 1960s as a young woman, as well as her experiences as a working mother in the 1970s and 1980s.

Ernaux reflects on the significant social and cultural changes that occurred during her lifetime in France in the novel. This encompasses the cultural and political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as more contemporary shifts in French society and the global economy. In this novel, imagined cultural and social observations are depicted through the narrator's personal experiences and perceptions. The narrator reflects on the changes in society, culture, and traditions over the years, and how they have shaped her own life and those around her. She uses a mixture of fact and fiction to capture her thoughts, feelings, and experiences. This is done through the use of snapshots, photographs, and local dialects, which help to convey the cultural and social atmosphere of the time. The narrator's observations are infused

with her own interpretations and subjective experiences, making them imagined

cultural and social observations, rather than straightforward factual accounts.

Annie Ernaux is skilled in blending her personal experiences with the historical and cultural events of 20th-century France. Through a first-person narrative, Ernaux links her memories to broader changes in society and historical events, demonstrating the connection between her individual story and the larger context of the time. This creates a distinctive form of autobiography that seamlessly blends history and personal narrative, giving the reader a deeper understanding of both Ernaux's life and the historical forces that shaped it.

Annie Ernaux also encompasses political events in her writing, such as wars and elections, including the Algerian War and the Vietnam War, and the May 1968 uprising and its aftermath. Although some of these events may be less appealing to non-French readers, many of them reflect political movements that were occurring throughout Europe, "We, who had the memory of a dry face under a kepi, little moustache of pre-war, on posters of the city in ruins, who had not heard the call of June 18, were bewildered and disappointed by those drooping cheeks and bushy brows of fat notary, that voice paralyzed by an old tremor. The character from Colombey grotesquely measured the time elapsed from childhood to today" (73).

What sets Ernaux apart is her ability to blend the political, social, and economic

aspects with the personal experiences of her life in a fluid narrative. Her writing is often marked by her skill in choosing just the right words to bring a new idea or experience to life. For example, she describes a Walkman as "the first time music entered the body". This combination of intelligence, emotion, and insight creates a captivating and powerful reading experience.

In Annie Ernaux's novel 'The Years,' various historical and cultural themes are explored. One of the main themes is the impact of modernity and social change on an individual's life. The narrator reflects on the rapid changes she experiences and witnesses during the post-World War II era. She occasionally makes sarcastic comments about the behaviour and habits of young people, remarking on their newfound ways, "Speaking little of their future. They opened the fridge and cupboards as they pleased to eat Danette, Bolino and Nutella at any time, slept with their girlfriend at home. They did not have time to do everything, sports, painting, film club and school trips. They did not want us anything. The journalists called them the bof- generation" (157).

Another key theme is class and social mobility. The narrator reflects on her working-class background and her experiences as a single mother trying to provide for her children and navigate the expectations of society. Class is one of the most significant themes in 'The Years'. At the start of her book, Ernaux informs

readers that she grew up in a poor, but happy household. And for the early part of her life, Ernaux didn't know anything more than that. But when Ernaux left home and went to school (and later, college), she learned just how poor she and her family really were. With that, Ernaux also learned what kind of rights and privileges people gained with money.

In 'The Years', one can hear different voices such as the social voice, the voice of women, the voice of religion, the literary and cultural voice. All these voices focus on the different classes of society, "in text, there is always, a voice of an era, that of a social group, with its values, its culture, its vision of the world and its contradictions" (106).

In 'The Years', Ernaux portrays a multifaceted image of a woman who finds herself torn between different generations and faces challenges related to class, education, motherhood, and the rapidly changing world. This makes the novel a compelling illustration of intersectional feminism, showcasing the complexity of a woman's experiences.

The protagonist approaches the complexities of gender, motherhood, and their connection to class, career, and societal change from a feminist perspective. The 1968 French Revolution marked a significant change in attitudes towards women's rights and sexuality, but Ernaux is wary of the commoditization of women's newfound freedom.

She questions the ideals of modernity, including individuality, equality, and consumerism, and finds the commercialization of women's liberation confusing, as the "perpetual display of their breasts and thighs in advertising was supposed to be construed as a tribute to feminine beauty" (120). Throughout the book, the reader encounters the intricate and conflicting emotions experienced by a woman straddling two generations. Her mixed feelings towards class, work, education, way of life, motherhood, and the evolving world order are thought-provoking and make 'The Years' a remarkable illustration of feminist intersectionality.

In this novel, Annie Ernaux deals with the topic of sexuality, primarily from a female perspective. Ernaux explores the sexual awakening in the mid-20th century that allowed young people to embrace the topic of sex, especially girls. She addresses the taboo nature of sex and sexuality in her adolescence that prevented girls from exploring their womanhood. Ernaux believes that fulfilling sexual desires can be a form of liberation from various forms of oppression, such as the strict control of the Catholic Church, an unsatisfying marriage, sexism, or any other type of restriction.

Sexual freedom is symbolized by the introduction of the contraceptive pill in France in the 1960s. The newfound sexual freedom, previously only enjoyed by men,

was a surprising and empowering experience for women. Ernaux considers the pill to be a miracle and tries to convey to the reader that what is now considered normal was once the result of a hard-fought and secret battle. According to the narrator, the introduction of the pill was a wonder during that time, "We who had aborted in kitchens, divorced, who had believed that our efforts to liberate us would serve others, we were taken from great fatigue"(173).

The Catholic Church is depicted as a source of moral authority in the novel. It plays a crucial role in shaping the upbringing of children with religious teachings. The narrator grew up in a predominantly Catholic region of France, where the church held a strong influence over daily life. Girls were expected to dress and behave in a certain way. However, Ernaux examines how fulfilling sexual desires was a means of challenging and liberating oneself from the strictures of the Catholic Church. She writes, "In these conditions," speaking of the Church's monitoring of young peoples' lives, "we faced endless years of masturbation before making love permissibly in marriage" (46).

The narrator sees the Catholic Church as a contributing factor to the segregation of women in 18th-century France. Men were considered the heads of families, with women encouraged to be submissive and loyal to their husbands. The church taught men to be cautious in their interactions with women. The composition of church

leadership is also a concern, as men hold superior positions, while women are relegated to lower ranks. The hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church is patriarchal, and no one is allowed to question its authority or composition.

Ernaux's views on consumerism are equally relevant. The 1968 revolution in France led to an increase in consumerism. People felt pressure to have the latest and greatest technology in order to stay up to date. At 60 years old, she is happy about the advancements in society but worried about the lack of connection and fast-paced lifestyle of the younger generation. She thinks about how consumerism has created a bigger divide between the rich and poor and feels out of place in this new world she once eagerly awaited:

"In nursing homes, an endless parade of commercials filed by the faded eyes of elderly women, for products and devices they never imagined they would need and had no chance of possessing."

Writing in the New York Times, Edmund White called the book "a Remembrance of Things Past for our age of media domination and consumerism, for our period of absolute commodity fetishism." Isabella Hammad also feels that "her descriptions of consumerism were amazing".

Ernaux mentions that people were surprised to see how a lot of time could be saved with things like instant soup, special cooking machines, and mayonnaise in tubes. By the 1990s, she notes, there were

so many kinds of yogurt and dairy dessert that even if you ate a different one every day you couldn't sample them all in a year. People liked canned food more than fresh food and preferred to eat peas from cans instead of from a garden. It was seen as stylish to serve pears in syrup instead of fresh from the tree. They were amazed by these inventions that made things so much easier and took away the need for so much hard work. It was said that soon there would be nothing left for us to do.

'The Years' is noteworthy for the dealing with the theme of poverty in this novel. The narrator's childhood surroundings are described with vivid images. The narrator mentions, "A woman who would urinate in public, behind the shack that served coffee near the ruins in Yvetot after the war, who then pulled up her skirts to fix her underwear and returned to the café"(1). She uses this image to show the difficulties faced by those in poverty. Despite growing up in ruins, the narrator's spirit was not broken and she still had a desire to reach her full potential. After World War II, many people's lives were disrupted and the narrator's family was among those who had a hard time making ends meet. They lacked basic necessities and had to live in cramped conditions to survive.

In 'The Years', Ernaux uses powerful language to contrast the differences between her parents' generation and her children's generation. What was once taboo is now considered trendy. Although she

recognizes that the modern times have allowed her the freedom to divorce, she is still uncertain about her motherhood shaped by progress, "While as a teenager she was terrified of losing her virginity before marriage, in late adolescence her unmarried sons begin to sleep with their girlfriends at their mother's apartment"(168).

Modernity has added a second shift for her, as she must now balance a career and household responsibilities. She reflects on the challenge of sending her children to expensive private schools to make them modern and her good mother, but as a single mother from a working-class background, she cannot afford this. Instead, her husband's absence led her to pursue writing and over time she becomes more of a confidant to her children. She tries to convince herself that she doesn't have to constantly think about her children, but also worries about the younger generation's newfound accountability towards their parents. Ernaux writes that this sense of disconnection was all-encompassing: "We were amazed to be where we were and to have all that we'd desires, a man, a child, an apartment" (91).

At the age of 60, she feels content that her children's generation no longer needs to resort to "kitchen table abortions" like she did in the past. However, she is concerned about their fast-paced lifestyles and the absence of mutuality. Throughout her life, she eagerly awaited the arrival of a more



progressive generation, but now that it is here, she finds herself feeling uncertain.

'The Years' is a memoir written by Annie Ernaux and "composed in an unremitting continuous tense" (229). The way it is written is meant to show how people experience life, which is fast and without structure. The book is in a continuous flow of text, moving in chronological order from World War II to the 2000s. Ernaux's use of a non-chronological narrative, switching between the past and the present, gives the novel a sense of the disjointed and non-linear nature of memory and experience. Joanna calls it "a beautiful book about the insanity of linear time, and furthermore the insanity of everything we are meant to regard as sane".

It aims to capture the experiences of people similar in age to her, and it is written in a continuous and uninterrupted tense that mirrors the way life is lived, quickly and without clear structure. The book is composed in a chronological manner, reflecting the way people experience time. Unlike most books, it doesn't have chapters or a table of contents, but is instead a seamless flow of text, moving from the end of World War II to the 2000s.

Annie Ernaux adopts a first-person perspective in 'The Years', where the narrator shares personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings with the reader. Despite the narrator's avoidance of using "I" and instead using "we", "they", or "one", the use of "I" persists throughout the

novel allowing for the restoration of the "depth of time" (223). This writing style has a significant impact on the tone, style, and overall atmosphere of the book. Ernaux's writing is simple, easy to comprehend, and deeply emotive.

Annie Ernaux uses the pronoun "we" instead of "I" in her novel to show that her experiences are shared by many people in her generation and society. This use of "we" creates a sense of unity and connection between the narrator, the reader, and others who have had similar experiences. This is to show that the

The narrator uses the pronoun "we" to distinguish herself from the adult generation and to indicate that collective life is connected to private life, which she believes doesn't exist anymore in her parents' generation, "The feast days after the war, in the endless slowness of meals, came out of nothingness and took shape the time already begun, the one that parents sometimes seemed to fix when they forgot to answer us" (22). It becomes more effective when it results in a female consensus through syllepse, as in "While waiting to be big enough to put Rouge Kiss and Bourjois perfume with j for joy, we collected plastic animals" (13).

By doing this, the themes in the book become more relatable and universal, and the reader is able to connect to the narrator and her generation more deeply. Using "we" also allows Ernaux to step back from her own experiences and write more

objectively, making the book feel like a commentary on society rather than just a personal story. The pronoun "you" partially shares the same meaning as "we"; it can also be used to refer to the narrator, "We started to go to school" (27). This gives the book a more authoritative voice.

The language that Ernaux employs in 'The Years' plays a significant role in blurring the lines between reality and fiction. By employing vagueness and ambiguity, subjective language, avoidance of concrete details, and literary techniques, Ernaux creates a narrative that is both personal and imaginative, making it difficult for the reader to distinguish between fact and fiction. This contributes to the complex and nuanced nature of her writing, and makes her work both thought-provoking and challenging for readers to interpret.

The book is interspersed with local slang, dialects and catchwords that bring her stories to life. The opening chapter of "The Years" concludes "Everything will be erased in a second. The dictionary of words amassed between cradle and deathbed, eliminated. All there will be is silence and no words to say it. Nothing will come out of the open mouth, neither I nor me. ... In conversation around a holiday table, we will be nothing but a first name, increasingly faceless, until we vanish into the" (48).

In conclusion, "The Years" by Annie Ernaux blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction in a unique and powerful way. The author's use of first-person narration, combined with her distinctive writing

style, creates an intimate and introspective narrative that explores the complexities of memory, identity, and the passage of time. The book provides a glimpse into the life of a woman and her generation, and the changes and challenges they faced as they navigated their way through the years. At the same time, it is a meditation on the larger social and cultural changes that took place in France during the author's lifetime, and a commentary on the ways in which these changes shaped the lives of those who lived through them. Through its exploration of the boundary between fact and fiction, "The Years" highlights the importance of personal narratives in shaping our understanding of the world, and underscores the power of literature to help us make sense of our experiences and our place in the world.

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